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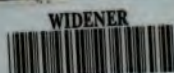
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OF THE

INHERITANCE OF ENGLISH LITERATURE;

An Address,

DELIVERED BEFORE THE MIAMI CHAPTER

OF THE

ALPHA DELTA PHI SOCIETY,

ON THE EVENING OF AUGUST 11, 1846.

By JAMES C. MOFFAT, A. M.
Professor of the Roman Language and Literature, and of *Æsthetics*.

PUBLISHED BY ORDER OF THE CHAPTER.

Cincinnati :

J. A. JAMES, WALNUT STREET.

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1846.

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OF THE

## INHERITANCE OF ENGLISH LITERATURE.

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*Young Gentlemen of the Alpha Delta Phi Society:*

IN the discharge of the duty to which you have appointed me, upon this occasion, I design to bring before you a period of history, not often treated, and yet of some importance to the literature of our native tongue. Of the various eras recorded in our literary annals the more recent are well known. The great minds of the Commonwealth, of the days of Elizabeth, and of the great Reformation, have furnished the materials of many an eloquent discourse; but there was another age, prior to all these, yea, more than a century earlier than the last mentioned, which, in regard to the names by which it was honored, and the works it produced, was not inferior to many a one of greater notoriety, while, in at least one other respect, it is the most important of all.

The long and prosperous reign of Edward the third is not often the subject of dissertation in a literary point of view; yet is well deserving of study on account of what it accomplished, but still more for what it suggested.

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to form any thing like an adequate conception of the amount to which the present is indebted to the past; a debt many items of which we not only fail to acknowledge, but of their existence never dream. To many an *inferior* generation, does our own stand indebted for its *superiority*; and much by us esteemed of modern growth is purely the interest of an old inheritance. Not only the *furniture* of our minds; but even the *manner of setting it forth*, is hereditary to a greater extent than the most reflecting are accustomed to perceive.

No person requires to be told that language is in the main the gift of our fathers ; but I think we do not often attempt to estimate the amount, in manner and train of thinking and expression, which we owe to a few eminent writers. What would have been the character of our native tongue, had no author yet appeared in it, we cannot pretend to say ; but one thing is evident, that many a feature which it now presents, would have been wanting. For, upon a comparison of successive periods in its history, we find its character forming by the process of accumulation ; every great author contributing something which is afterwards an essential ingredient, while he adopts the general principle and manner of his predecessors. And as we trace the history backward, though we miss, one after another, many familiar features, yet even in the earliest authors are to be found certain distinguishing traits, which are no less characteristic of our literature in the present day.

The style of Addison is now very familiar, and appears the natural offspring of English thought and feeling ; but where was the style of Addison, before Addison wrote ? It was not in literature. Was it to be found in conversation, and did Addison take it thence ? Very few can yet attain unto it, even with the model before them. But the style of Addison did not differ, by any *violent* degree, from what had been already established as classical English. For, although he introduced a variety, he had been educated upon the works of his predecessors ; and from them adopted all the essentials of a native style. He is still more English than Addisonian.

Thus it must be with every original writer of later times ; while he adds something of his own to the edifice which he aids in erecting, his addition must be in conformity to the plan of the preceding work, and of course, a greater amount of credit must still be due to those by whom its foundations were laid. And a nation's literary character must be mainly the aggregate of the mental habits of all its authors, thus silently but inevitably pressed forward by the excellencies of their predecessors. There are, it is true, certain qualities which have been developed, by the repeated effort of the writer to reach the consciousness of his reader ; but the taste of readers, as well as

writers, is formed to a great degree by the hereditary literary manner; they have been educated by it, and are daily partaking of its influence. And although the literary always differs from the conversational manner, we have perfect assurance that refined conversation would not have been what it is, but for literature. Consequently, many of the distinguishing features of national literature, must be due to the intellectual character of the first great authors, perpetuated from age to age. Such an impress from the character of Moses remained upon Jewish literature to its latest day. Such was the dominion of Homer over the ancient heathen world; of Dante and Petrarch over modern Italy; and thus, in English, we owe more than has ever yet been acknowledged, to the great minds who first modulated our native tongue.

I purpose, then, to call your attention to some of the items of this old inheritance, their nature, the causes which gave rise to them, and the obligations they impose.

And, in the first place, the causes, although extremely varied, may be classed under a few heads, as direct or indirect; as springing from the nation itself, or operating on it from abroad.

Now, in order the better to comprehend this division of the subject, let us contemplate for a few moments a point in time immediately antecedent to that first literary era.

If, from the present date, we look back along the history of the land of our fathers, just five hundred years, attention will be arrested by a period of more than common interest to the student of English literature; on account, not of what it had then become, but of the remarkable convergence of causes tending to the production of that character which it has now borne so long. Up to the year 1346, our native tongue could lay no claim to literary honors. It could not present one author, not even a single book, worthy of notice. A few ballads and rhyming chronicles, such as those of Robert of Gloucester, of Manning of Brunne, and the Sir Tristram of Thomas the Rhymour, constituted the only store of native reading. But at the date which I have assumed, a spirit of inquiry was awakening throughout the land, and learning had become an object of very general pursuit. The multitudes who then thronged the universities of Britain, were

great beyond all comparison with those of any other time. We are informed by contemporary and respectable authorities, that not less than thirty thousand students were then in attendance at Oxford alone ; and, what is of more importance, there were great minds at work among both the teachers and the taught. It was the flourishing period of the illustrious Okham and Bradwardine, and many others, whose useful labors have failed to render their names familiar to modern ears. Among their pupils were some who have been more fortunate in this respect than themselves. Such were Chaucer, Langlande, Gower, Mandeville and Wyckliffe, who were then silently forming the minds destined to direct the views and mould the taste of a mighty people.

The learning of that age was still chiefly employed with metaphysical theology ; although not so strictly confined as that of the preceding to scholastic subtilties. The philosophy of the schoolmen continued to be taught ; but their day was drawing to a close. The celebrated William Okham was their only representative of superior ability ; and the energetic minds of the rising generation were taking a new direction. Old Roger Bacon had already indicated that course and method of investigation which was afterwards so well defined by his more fortunate namesake. Clearer, more practical and common-sense views of things and their relations, were gradually advancing among the young scholars of that epoch.

King Edward the Third, then just entering upon that career of innovation which marked his illustrious reign, was himself one of the most promising signs of the times. Being of great natural ability, well educated and of a literary turn, he found it as conducive to his profit, as it was agreeable to his taste, to favor native talent. He spent much money in the collection of valuable books ; and encouraged the pursuits of others whose time could be more exclusively devoted to such labor. It was a century before the invention of printing, and copies of books were multiplied only at great labor and expense ; and even public libraries were but scantily supplied. The library of Oxford had, up to nearly that date, been confined to the compass of a few mouldy boxes in the corner of a cellar. But, stimulated by the example of the king and the increasing demand for books, many

now turned their attention to the business of collecting and transcribing all the valuable works to be found. Still the books which were then worthy of transcription, being in foreign languages, were inaccessible to the body of the people.

For two hundred and fifty years, the language of England had been unsettled. Saxon and French had contended for the mastery, and the result was entirely in favor of neither. A new language had arisen from their combination, and now for several ages formed the popular speech. But it was held in contempt by the learned and the noble. French was employed in business and refined society, and comprehended most productions of a temporary interest or of amusement, while Latin alone was deemed proper for those of graver importance. But neither of these were attainable by the mass of a population, who, ground down as they were by tithes, taxes, and arbitrary exactions, had not leisure to acquire more than the rudiments of that knowledge needful to the adequate discharge of their daily duties.

At the time to which our view is now directed, the popular tongue was rapidly gaining ground upon the Latin and French. Not long before, members of schools and universities, had been forbidden the use of English within the bounds of their respective institutions, being compelled to employ in their conversation either Latin or French; but now this regulation was very carelessly obeyed. The vulgar tongue was often introduced by stealth, and only a few years later, Mr. John Cornwall set the portentous example of permitting his pupils to translate their Latin into English. Though then for the first time admitted to the service of learning, this vulgar tongue had already grown up to a masculine and hardy form and character: and no sooner had it broken over the barriers of aristocratic and scholastic prejudice, than its merits became generally recognized.

The circumstances of the government conspired with this incipient taste, to procure for the new tongue an established respectability. The fierce war then waged with France, excited an animosity towards that nation, which soon extended to their language; and it became the interest of the king that no part of his forces should be united in the bonds of a common idiom with those against whom he led them. Accordingly, the French began

to be abandoned, and the English to assume its place as the medium of refined intercourse. Moreover, in order that even the uneducated might have it in their power to ascertain the laws of the land, and might, in judicial trial, understand the arguments urged for and against them, it was ordained by an act of Parliament, that all the business of legislation, and of the courts of justice, should be transacted in English.

While these and other internal causes were directly favoring the birth of a native literature, many external circumstances were strongly tending to the same effect.

The middle of the fourteenth century was a remarkable epoch not only in the history of England, but also of Italy and France. It was a time of the breaking forth of new ideas, or of those that had been long forgotten.

The revival of ancient learning had just begun in Italy and France. The night of the dark ages was slowly breaking away, and the dawn of a better time was beginning, with a faint light, to irradiate the horizon. The celebrated Petrarch was even then busy in those investigations, whereby he disinterred so many of the productions of the ancient world, and furnished a new stimulus to the enquiring minds of his own and the succeeding century.

The beauties of ancient art were again appreciated and zealously studied, and modern intellect, lighted up by contact with the fire of ancient genius, had already called into being creations of the highest excellence. Moved by emulation of Virgil, Dante had produced his great and singular poem, as unlike its professed model as it is unapproached by any succeeding production. And Boccaccio and Petrarch were then in the early bloom of their fame.

The persecution of the Albigenses had desolated Provence, and silenced the voice of the Troubadours; but their melodious lays were still the delight of all refined and delicate minds, and among the minstrels of England, they were fondly preserved in connection with the memory of Richard, the Troubadour King, and the reigning monarch's love of chivalry, that ideal life which they had celebrated so long. They were also the models of the more popular works of Petrarch, who contributed much to the formation of the taste of his times. Hence, many

of the traits of the "gay science" are found impressed upon the earlier productions of our English poets.

The works of the Trouveres, and the romances of chivalry, were the chief entertainments of a literary kind provided for those who read for the purpose of amusement. These were contained in the *langue d'oïl*, or dialect of Norman France, which was also that employed by the nobility and fashionable society of England. The prevailing taste of the period to which our attention is directed, presented a motive to the translation of many of these romances into English verse, by persons whom the labor has failed to immortalize. Within the reign of Edward the Third, these translations became very numerous, enlarging the amount of English reading, without much improvement to the readers.

There were some other influences tending to foster the growth of an enquiring spirit, nor less that of the imagination. The last crusade had failed about fifty years before, and many of the strange tales of those returned from Palestine, were still floating among the people, having accumulated no little of the marvellous in the course of repetition. The real grandeur of the enterprises lent a romantic dignity to every thing connected with them, and even procured a poetic belief for the wild and incredible narratives of Sir John Mandeville.

The intercourse among the nations of Europe, created by those mighty campaigns, was still kept up, from more practical, though less imposing motives, and the literature of the nations in the south-west of Europe, was to the educated common property. Especially was that of Italy of much weight in the formation of the taste of the English scholar.

Such were some of the antecedents *productive* of literature in the English tongue. There were others which, although not causative of its existence, served very decidedly to give it direction, to *form its character*, and furnish it with subject matter of general interest.

The Church of Rome had now reached the utmost limit of her temporal authority. During the preceding two centuries, it had been almost unbounded. Not only did she lay claim to a possession in the mass of the people; but even the barons and the king had been obliged to submit to her impositions, and suffer the penal-



ties by her inflicted. The ministers of that system were of all ranks of society. While thousands of inferior priests mingled with the people, and moulded their minds to the purposes of the church, those of the higher grades were the peers and companions of the noble, and equally wielded those ill-informed but haughty spirits; and the Pope, their imperial head, presumed to dictate to kings and emperors, commands which they found it dangerous to disobey. Excommunication reduced many a proud monarch to the humiliating necessity of acknowledging himself the servant and vassal of his holiness the Pope.

The kings of England had been the firmest in resistance to that ecclesiastical domination; but refractory as were such monarchs as Henry II. and Edward I., they were compelled to yield much to the head of the Roman Church.

Such a degree of power, wielded for so long a time by a body of men who enjoyed none of those relations to society, which have the greatest influence in restraining the stronger passions, gave occasion to numberless abuses. The clergy, high and low, had become shamefully corrupt; and their impostures so impudently gross, that a large proportion of all ranks of the nation was beginning to discover the true nature of the papal system, and needed only some bold leader to take the first step towards a reform.

Many of the doctrines of the Church, not less than her high-handed despotism, and practical immorality, had become offensive. Doctrines that contradicted the testimony of the senses, were losing their hold upon the faith of the intelligent. Image and picture worship was never a favorite with our forefathers, and the authority which a foreign church had given it, was easily shaken.

Implicit obedience to the priesthood, and salvation through their intercession and good works, began to be pretty well understood among all ranks; but, hitherto, no public voice had given utterance to the private, but very general discontent. The people can neither do nor say without a leader, and he was yet wanting.

In morals, the corrupt example of the clergy had long been faithfully followed by their too docile flocks. Never was the popular morality of England in a more degraded state. Among the

higher classes, sumptuousness in dress, food, and equipage had been carried to the most foolish extravagance. The greater part of their waking existence was employed in pampering and decorating their persons, and in displaying them in various gorgeous pageants. And the vices of the humbler ranks seem to have been restrained only by their necessities. At the time to which I refer, these evils continued in fashion; but not without some intimations of a change. For, as the means of upholding the aristocratic extravagance were drawn ultimately from the laboring people, among them was beginning to rise a spirit of resistance to the depravity of their masters, which, hitherto, had made itself known only in popular jest and sly strokes of indirect satire.

Such, then, were some of the leading influences affecting the intellectual development of the undergraduates of 1346—some of the agencies which combined to mould the feelings and give direction to the views and efforts of Chaucer, Gower, Langlande, Mandeville, Barbour, Wyckliffe, and the other stars of that first constellation in English literature.

The earliest author in our language, who can justly be called great, is Geoffrey Chaucer. His poem, "The Court of Love," is, by himself, referred to the year 1346, which is, therefore, properly assumed as the earliest date in our literary history. That poem was followed, at various intervals, during a long series of years, by other works, both in verse and prose, which proved the growth of the poet's mind, and his increasing command of the stores of his native language.

The earlier poems of Chaucer were composed when he was very young, and are not remarkable for any thing except their morality, their perfect virgin purity of thought, which is the more striking when contrasted with the popular vices of the age, and is perhaps to be accounted for by the influence exerted over him, even in boyhood, by his excellent friend, Wyckliffe:

As he advanced in years, his taste became more and more affected by the style and productions of the Italian poets, especially of Boccaccio; and, from contact with that vigorous mind, he acquired greater boldness and energy, but lost much of his native moral delicacy of expression, and while turning attention more to the duty of reproving vice, indulged himself occasionally too far

in freedom of speech concerning it. He continued, however, to his latest day, not only the reprover of vice, but the zealous advocate of pure religion.

The theological views of his friend and fellow student, Wyckliffe, he defended and maintained, at the risk of his life and confiscation of his property. He was one of the earliest sufferers for the advocacy of the Reformation, in Britain.

Soon after the publication of his first poems, he was joined by Robert Langlande, whose able satire, called "The Visions of Piers Plowman," exposed, with bold, strong sense and playful wit, the corruptions of the age, and especially of the priesthood.

To the same labor did John Gower, throughout a long life, address himself; but he adopted the new language, with some hesitancy and not without committing his reputation also to the Latin and French. His longest English poem was the work of his old age. The same aspirations after social and civil reformation are equally manifest in the heroic poem of John Barbour. There was no more devoted advocate of liberty of life and conscience, than that worthy representative of North Britain. His subject, the adventures of Robert Bruce, furnished many an occasion for the utterance of such sentiment. And his noble and beautiful encomium of freedom, has recommended itself so well to modern taste, as to be more frequently quoted than any other production of his time.

While those gifted young men entertained their countrymen with real poetry, of native growth, Sir John Mandeville produced, in his volume of travels, the earliest book of English prose. The wild tales and romantic adventures related in that singular work, it is true, are more nearly related to poetry; but in form, at least, the far-travelled knight, was the first upon the field of prose composition. And if he relates many a tale hard to be received, we are not the less inclined to regard him as the true father of modern travellers; nay, should be glad to explain, upon the plea of original sin, the appearance of the same transgression among so many.

Mandeville has not the vigor of thought nor the nervous style of Chaucer or Langlande. He is enfeebled by superstition, and so transcendantly credulous, that nothing is too wonderful for his

belief: consequently, he was no partizan of reform. Although entering the field later than Chaucer, and Langlande, he was really far behind them in regard to all measures and views of advance and improvement. He wrote his work also in Latin and French, adopting English with hesitation, as a new fashion, which perhaps would not last long. Nevertheless, in his romantic imagination, and union of poetic feeling with prose harmony, he has bequeathed a valuable legacy to English literature.

But if Mandeville feebly wielded the weapon which he wore, another now entered the contest, in whose hand English prose was destined to a more efficient purpose. His predecessors only assailed prevalent abuse with the light missiles of ridicule; John Wyckliffe levelled his artillery at the organized array of false doctrine, and proved the church, the author of many of the fashionable evils, to be guilty, not only of abuses, but of radical and baneful error.

As a preacher, and lecturer in the University of Oxford, he had early begun to reprove the dissolute morals and erroneous teaching of the monks and mendicant friars; but from about 1360, through the instrumentality of published essays, he made his opinions known throughout the kingdom, and boldly advocated a complete reform of the church. He also organized a body of itinerant preachers,\* who devoting themselves, in poverty and toil, to the work of instruction, travelled through the country proclaiming the pure truths of the gospel.†

The labours of those men contributed not only to the interests of liberty and true religion; but also to the improvement of the English tongue. For, although learned, they discarded the use of all foreign idioms in their labours among the people. Wyckliffe himself travelled with them, occasionally; but spent the greater part of his time in writing on the subjects of reformation. The amount of his original productions was very great. In the sixteenth century, there were extant, not less than one hundred and fifty of his essays. But his great work was a translation of the scriptures, which, issued in portions, at different times, and carried throughout the land by his itinerant preachers, laid a found-

\* Lingard, vol. iv, page 160.

† Lecuy, in Bio. Uni.

dation at once for the literary style, and for the reformed religion. The version was completed just the year before his death.

Wyckliffe was the first to prove the copiousness and energy of English prose. Although his style is antiquated, no reader can fail to be moved by its vigor and unaffected earnestness.

The views which he advocated were found to be so consonant to the common feelings and understanding, and urged with such a cogency of argument, that they were at once adopted by a large proportion of the nation. Under less favourable circumstances, such daring would have cost his life; but supported, as he was, by the representatives of the Commons,\* by the king,† and his son the Duke of Lancaster,‡ he advocated with impunity the leading principles of liberty|| and protestant religion.§

During the life of Edward III, it was a dangerous matter for a foreign power to interfere with either his people or his government; and all the attempts of the church to impede the progress of the reformation were feeble and ineffectual.¶ But under the minority and afterwards less vigorous reign of his successor, the Reformers were called to endure persecution, which, however, was for some time conducted with little energy, on account of the then existing embarrassments at the head of ecclesiastical authority. For immediately after the death of Edward, began the great schism of the West, when two, and sometimes three popes were reigning at once, and the church presented the remarkable phenomenon of a body with a plurality of infallible heads, thwarting, condemning, and excommunicating one another. Such a state of things furnished abundant occasion for animadversion, and permitted, nay, rendered inevitable, an unprecedented freedom of speech, concerning ecclesiastical dignities. In England, where the head of the church had even previously begun to lose his hold upon the public mind, this was a dangerous blow to his authority. Thus, although measures were taken against the Reformers, very much

\* Lingard, vol. iv, page 190.

† Lingard, vol. iv, page 159.—Lecuy, in Bio. Mir.

‡ Lingard, vol. iv, page 160-1.—Lecuy.

|| Lecuy art. Wyck. in Bio. Uni.

§ Hume. Richard II. Miscel, Trans.

¶ Hume. Lecuy. Lingard Ed. III, chap. 2, near the end.

to the inconvenience of many of them, yet no decidedly efficient efforts were made to put them down, until many years afterwards when the church had reunited her now divided energies. But, ere that time, John Wyckliffe had been called from his earthly labors to the enjoyment of his heavenly reward.

The poet Chaucer, who had defended the principles of the Reformer, both in public and private, was also indebted to the king and his son of Lancaster, for their invaluable protection; but after the death of Edward, and during the disfavour of the Duke of Lancaster, Chaucer, being high in political place, was found a more assailable person than the humble priest of Lutterworth had been, and accordingly was deprived of his office, and compelled to take refuge in a foreign land. For sometime he maintained himself and several other exiles for the same cause, upon the remnant of his fortune; but this became exhausted and obliged to make some effort for their support, he returned privately to England, where he was apprehended and thrown into prison.

After years of gloom and distress under various forms of persecution his old friend and patron of Lancaster having returned to his influence at court, employed it in behalf of the poet, rescued him from the grasp of his enemies, and the destitution to which they had brought him, procured for him several grants from the crown which repaid his losses and enabled him to spend his latter days in peace.\*

After the death of Wyckliffe and the other heroes of that first Reformation, the means taken to check the spread of their doctrines were more successful. Wyckliffe had, in his own country, no immediate successor, to carry forward the work with requisite energy. Other able men there were; but a preacher alone could be the leader in such a movement, and a preacher adequate to the task was not found.

The cause languished. The people, again without a spokesman and a head, became discouraged and humbled themselves for a century more, to the domination of their spiritual tyrants. But the work thus begun did not fail.† In England, a small

\* Suard, in *Bio. Uni.*

† Hume, Richard II. *Miscel. Trans.—Locuy in Bio. Uni.*

body continued to maintain, in obscurity and persecution, the principles of pure religion and the rights of conscience. And a certain Bohemian youth, who had listened to the lectures of Wyckliffe in the University of Oxford, becoming a convert to his doctrines, carried them into his native land; where they were adopted and advocated by the able minds and unshrinking zeal of John Huss, and Jerome of Prague. They might desecrate the tomb of Wyckliffe, burn his decaying bones and scatter their ashes upon the waters; but they could not quench the truth of God, which he had taught, and which continued to add to the number of its converts, even in the face of persecution and of death. For more than a century it struggled against error, superior by alliance with the civil power, until supported by the more favored Reformation of Germany and Switzerland, it emerged into triumphant success.

In contemplating the facts now stated, one thing must appear to the observer of the present day, not a little remarkable. Those men who were most active in resistance to tyranny and in advocacy of liberty of life and conscience, were the most faithful adherents of the crown, and when most strenuous in the cause of liberty, and the elevation of the people, were the most marked by the favor of their highly gifted monarch. This apparent inconsistency had its origin in causes belonging to the constitution of society, the ingredients of government, and the foreign relations of the kingdom.

During the dark ages, which had not even then entirely passed away, the people, ignorant and incapable of self government, had been compelled to submit to the protection of some persons of greater power or wisdom than themselves. And under the arrangements of the Saxon government, the most natural refuge was in their land-owners and the priest of their district.

Thus the land-owners, each within his own possessions came to divide with the ministers of the church, an almost sovereign power, which for a time was wielded to the real benefit of the governed; for the rich man regarded his tenants as his garrison, and the only claim of the priest was founded upon his care of their spiritual welfare. But in the course of centuries, the possession of sovereignty had its natural effect in corrupting both;

the one became a baronial tyrant, and the other a prince bishop, whose cure of souls had become a temporal living, and the people were oppressed to the last degree of endurance, in order to maintain that double provincial sovereignty.\* By William, the Conqueror, the feudal system was engrafted upon this very congenial stock.† The King was then the head of the barons, and regarding them as the representatives of the nation, with them alone transacted public business. It had not been the error of the Kings of England so much to neglect the people as not to deal with them directly; but always through the medium of their baronial lords, who, with the ecclesiastical dignitaries, alone constituted the parliament. In the course of their frequent contests with these two powers, the Kings had found out the value of the commons as a support, and cautiously courted their favor. The feudal system which had bound the vassals to their respective lords, had, previously to the period which we contemplate, begun to wane, and the eyes of the commons to be directed to the King as the safest liege lord of all. The insurrection of the barons, under Henry III, and their subsequent wars with the crown, resulting in their defeat, had established the superiority of the monarch, the commons having, in the course of the contest, been courted by both parties, had been taught to think themselves not altogether without value in the State. But it was not until the reign of Edward III, that they were regarded as an integral, indispensable portion of the legislative body.

Several events led Edward, the Third, to a higher estimation of the commons, and to pay an increased regard to their interests and good will.

In August 1346, was fought the momentous battle of Creci, which is correctly viewed as a trial of strength between the mailed clad knight and the light armed soldier of the commons.§ Hitherto the baronry had arrogated to themselves all the glory of warlike achievements, and believed themselves invincible by any numbers of humbler rank and lighter armor, and upon this

\* Turner's Anglo Sax. Vol. 2, Append. IV. Hume, Chap. III, Appendix.

† Hume, Chap. IV.

§ Michelet Book VI. Chap. 1.



assumption based their claim to superior consideration. A fair trial of strength had not been made, on a scale large enough to attract general attention. In the war of the Barons many of their numbers were on the side of the King, and they still pretended that, only division in their own ranks had wrought their defeat. They were about to be deprived of such a refuge.

On the bloody field of Creci were arranged the pride of the chivalry of the most chivalrous nation of the world, in their completest armor and most devoted valor. They were cut to pieces by less than half their number, composed chiefly of English archers, and ill clad and lightly armed Welsh infantry.\*

In October of the same year, the same cause was tried with the same result at the battle of Nevil's Cross.†

The ordinary on-looker failed to read the lesson of those well fought fields; but it did not escape the quick understanding of the King of England. The people were not only the most trustworthy, and those whose interest most nearly coincided with his own; but they were the strongest in the day of battle; and well did they repay his penetration, in many a later contest, both of war and peace. Hence, Edward III., as far as consisted with his arbitrary temper, favored the interests of the people. He has been fairly called the father of English commerce;‡ by him was the right of the people to determine what taxes should be laid upon them first established in practice,|| and by him their regular, systematic representation in Parliament confirmed;§ he sustained them in shaking off the tribute imposed by the Pope; he first granted them laws and judicial trial in their own language;¶ he sustained those who defended the rights of the people against the oppression of the other two states; and many other of the dearest rights of Englishmen, and the descendants of Englishmen, date from the same illustrious reign.

The people, on their side, finding in the power and favor of the king, a means of protection against the other two states, readily paid that service which he demanded. For they perceived

\* Froisart. Hume. Michelet.

† Lingard.

‡ Hallam.

|| Lingard.

§ Lecuy.

¶ Hume, Ed. III. Miscel. Trans. near the end.

that in him their strength was united ; and the head which a large body of people always needs, was secured. Not that Edward ever was a demagogue. His great mind embraced the interests of the whole nation, and aimed at bringing all three states into, what he deemed, a proper subordination to the crown. This could be brought about only by balancing the one against the other, which, of necessity, involved the elevation of the common people. The people, therefore, justly regarded the king, whether interested or not, as their friend and protector. They had come to that point of transition from feudalism and ecclesiastical tyranny, when the cause of monarchy was the cause of liberty. And hence the perfect consistency between the bold language, sentiments and principles of Wyckliffe, Langlande and Chaucer, with their attachment to the person and government of the monarch, and their ready acceptance of the protection of himself and of his family. Monarchy was then their only security against a more terrible despotism.\* The time came when these relations were changed. Under the detestable Henry VIII., and his arbitrary daughter, Elizabeth, the throne became an impediment, obstructing or perverting every effort towards religious as well as civil liberty ; and the day soon after arrived when its hinderance could no longer be endured, and it was hurled from its place ; but things were otherwise in the time of Edward the Third. Then, the King, although really the master of the people, and well enough disposed to be their tyrant, from the circumstances of his reign, appeared rather as their leader, and the people defended the cause of the King, because it led to the only step towards liberty, which could then safely be taken. Although many of the works of the authors now mentioned, were produced after the death of that able monarch, yet to his reign are to be referred all the influences which tended to develope and give direction to their energies.

From the statements now rapidly made, it appears, that—

1st. English literature took its rise in the wants of the common people. For them it was produced, to their interest was it dedicated, and, from that time to this, it has continued to be, not

\* Hume. Ed. III. Miscel. Trans. Statute of Provisoers.

the hot-house plant nursed in the favor of an aristocracy, but the instrument of popular instruction, and the utterance of truth and beauty, which find their appreciation in the respectable ranks of the commonality.

2ndly. It was not the blind attempt of ignorant beginners; but of men well educated, familiar with the rules of art, and holding such a definite object before them, that art was made subservient to utility—an example which, well followed, has given our literature that expressly practical bearing by which it is distinguished.

3rdly. It was poetical; but its poetry was not a factitious thing of mere display, to embody fanciful conceits, to sound the praises of a great lord, or gratify a fastidious taste; but a manly and graceful expression of real emotion, pictures of actual life and practical lessons of morals and religion—a fit antecedent to that series of ages which have produced a list of poets eminent over all others, ancient and modern, for their profound truth and broad foundations in reality.

4thly. Our literature, was from the first, enriched by learning, obtained through other tongues, and digested into the native system. And—

Above all, it had a grand political and religious bearing and design; being the first light of the Reformation, and coincident with and conducive to the first steps towards political freedom. From the dawn of its existence, the instrument of religious and civil liberty, its first utterance was a condemnation of ecclesiastical error and moral turpitude; was a plea for sound religion and purity of life, for equal rights and the exercise of individual judgment; and of all its excellencies, none have been more directly or zealously cultivated. Every point of eminence in the history of our language, has been marked by the same protestant and independent character.

I have only to recal your thoughts to that brilliant era, which fell on the latter days of Elizabeth and the reign of James—to the giant minds of the Commonwealth—to the days of the Revolution—to those of George III.,—and point to the triumphs of the nineteenth century, to furnish proof that English literature is consecrated to protestantism, and her own brother, civil liberty.

Such, then, are some of the items of the hereditary possession of the language we employ, of which I conceive that the last mentioned is by far the most striking to every external observer, and that one by which its nationality is most extensively distinguished.

To our own perceptions, familiarity has prevented the detection of it as any thing peculiar; but a very little comparison will assure the enquirer of the truth, that it is a possession to which no other literature of modern times can lay claim. Where shall we look for another to which it belongs, as an original and unalienated inheritance? Shall it be to Italy, which, from the days of Dante down to the present, has lain in the fetters of both ecclesiastical and political bondage? Shall it be to Germany; where the very mention of liberty is treason? Shall it be to France? Vigorous, indeed, have been the efforts of that remarkable people to break the fetters rivetted upon them, by the despotism of centuries; but their literature has only recently attempted to acquire that possession which has belonged to English from its birth, and grown with its growth for five hundred years. I bring no accusation against the literatures of other lands. Many of them are invaluable, all discharge respectively their proper duties in the work of human improvement, and for much are we their debtors; but granting to them peculiar possessions of their own, I claim the advocacy of liberty and protestant religion as the inheritance of our own beautiful and manly tongue.

True, every author whom it includes, has not been actuated by kindred motives, nor been careful to maintain the integrity of such an inheritance; but, upon the whole, so well has it been cultivated that even our common idioms have become, to the defenders of civil or ecclesiastical tyranny or imposition, exceedingly awkward weapons. Indeed, of late the more cautious of such writers seem to have felt the expediency of evading plain and idiomatic English. Our freedom of speech has occasionally been abused; but, after all, our literature is purer, in a moral sense, than those which enjoy not its civil liberty.

Attempts, mistaken attempts have, at various periods, been made to change its character and to deprive it of this noble birthright. A false scholarship, at one time, endeavored to force

upon it the mask of ancient Rome, and make of it a heterogeneous thing, of no independent form or standing; but the attempt resulted only in leaving its champions obsolete. A later effort was made to confine it to the procrustean measure of the school of Boileau, which had an equally calamitous effect upon its advocates. Within our own century we have been threatened with an obscurity from the regions of Kant and Fichte; but the danger has been of limited extent and short duration. Already those illdefined productions of cloudland are passing away from the face of the serene sky of pure and native English. Invaluable are the productions of Roman, French, or German intellect; but however just the admiration of their beauties, however praiseworthy to learn from the lessons of their wisdom, neither can justify us when, for the sake of adopting their peculiar style of thought and expression, we would destroy the individuality of our own. Ill advised must he be who could wish to divert into another channel, a literature, which, in following its hereditary course, is doing more for the social, and civil, and religious regeneration of mankind, than all the literatures of the world besides. Is not our language even in *reformed* Europe, recognized as eminently and characteristically, the language of protestantism, and known, wherever it is known, as the language of freemen? Is it not, beyond all comparison, the language of protestant missions?—Yes, in our daily intercourse, we are employing a medium of communication which is wielding the most powerful and salutary influence over the destinies of the world; and that which to heathen lands is almost the only foreign tongue that proclaims the principles of just freedom and Bible truth.—An influence and a praise which has been obtained by the exercise of those very faculties developed in it, from the beginning, by the great men of that distant era which we have been contemplating.

Moreover, it is an inheritance, which, invaluable at the first, has been enriched and expanded by the successive additions of more than fifteen most active generations. Century after century has the current of English literature been flowing on, and widening and deepening, and increasing the number of its tributaries, until now, even the productions of a nation added to it are but

like a rill to the waters of the Ohio. No feeble ray at its rising, it has continued unremittingly to augment and to diffuse its brightness. Already has it bound the earth in its girdle of light. There is not an hour, in the whole circle of the sun, when the principles called into action by Wyckliffe, are not operating through the medium of that language which he was the first to consecrate to such a purpose.

And now, young gentlemen, permit me to recommend the exertion of your utmost effort to place yourselves among the worthy heirs of this noble inheritance, and to maintain its integrity in the hands of your generation. As far as God has gifted you respectively with talent, strive towards the completion of the obvious mission of our branch of the human family, never subjecting either your faith or politics to any man or set of men; but guided by that monitor which God has planted within you, and that Holy Word which He has set before you, be always ready to take the next correct step in advancement towards the grand desideratum, the regeneration of all mankind. Contribute your efforts, that wherever our literature extends it may carry the pure principles of those by whom it was founded: and in the exercise of your faculties to such an end, may you, also, be attended by the efficient energy of that God, in whose service they were content to suffer and to toil.













